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ABSTRACT

A rationale for and implications of independent foreign language study programs are developed in this article. Programs at the Department of Germanic Languages at the University of Pittsburgh focus on problems and advantages resulting from such programs. Specific remarks are directed to methodology, the course syllabus, and grading procedures. (RL)

A CASE FOR INDEPENDENT FOREIGN LANGUAGE STUDY

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It is hardly a sweeping generalization to state that FL teachers are well aware of student demands for the abolition of FL requirements. These demands have received wide publicity and have often precipitated impassioned reactions within university and college communities.

But what is not always brought to light is the list of particulars which often accompany these demands. Student representatives not only want to be free of what they consider self-defeating requirements, but, among other things, these representatives have demanded of several major universities that independent FL programs be established: FL learning outside of the classroom.

The rationale for such a program is simple. These students contend that FL learning is little more than the acquisition of a skill. They want to be free to develop this skill at a pace which best suits their individual abilities. These students argue, therefore, that in a modern university, those who wish to acquire a FL faster or slower than is possible in the traditional, structured classroom situation should be permitted to do so. They also argue that when properly guided, students can learn a FL on their own.

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Although open to debate, these arguments are not without merit.

After some hesitation and with a great deal of curiosity, the Department of Germanic Languages at The University of Pittsburgh decided to test the accuracy of these contentions by establishing an independent FL program for Danish, Dutch, German, Norwegian, and Swedish.

Experiences gained from the first year of this program were rewarding and unexpected. One-fourth of the Department's beginning students enrolled in the independent study program. Seventy percent completed at least one level each term. (Five percent of these completed two levels in one term.) The remaining thirty percent either dropped the course or elected to continue the same level in the following term, i.e., they progressed at a slower rate than the students enrolled in the regular beginning courses. These students proceeded to a second level only after they felt they had completely mastered the first level.

Students were permitted to work on their own and at their own speed.

But in being rewarded by a thriving and well received program, the Department also learned some lessons; and as a result of this experience, the following conclusions seem in order.

It is not only important to appoint a special co-ordinator for the program, but if he is to work effectively with a large portion of the beginning enrollment, the co-ordinator must

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be released from some of his teaching duties and provided secretarial help. This may at first seem an unjustifiable expense for many departments, especially those whose budgeting practices are traditionally oriented. It is, however, no longer possible for FL departments to ignore financially the needs of beginning students. A co-ordinator for an independent FL program becomes in effect an instructor for several classes as well as different levels, and in some cases, even different languages. And even though students in an independent FL program are free to work on their own, there remain the time consuming questions not only of course structure and texts but also the continuing demand for new examinations and counseling.

The latter, if conducted properly, is in itself most time consuming. In addition to the students already enrolled in the program, the co-ordinator will be asked to counsel students who are unsure of whether to enroll in a regular course or in the independent FL program. The need for a co-ordinator who is easily accessible is important to the success of any FL program, and this is especially true for an independent study program. Not every student is capable of working without classroom guidance. Each student should be advised of the nature of the program and of what will be expected of him.

One of the first questions which must be answered, and perhaps the thorniest, is that of text, workbook, and tapes. All material should be self-explanatory. It should be well intergrated. It should provide opportunity for extensive

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drilling. And above all, it should permit the student to control his own progress. He must be able to recognize what he has learned and what he has failed to understand. This can be partially resolved for the beginning levels by selecting a text with an accompanying workbook and a teacher's manual, or answer-book.

For the intermediate levels there are readers with English translations on the page opposite the FL selection as well as readers with extensive suggestions for translations in the margins. These readers can be used with a second reader with only limited footnoting. Review grammars and tapes are also available. No matter what reader is selected, the co-ordinator will be asked to examine periodically each student's progress.

But for students who do not understand the structure of their native language, even this is unsatisfactory. The co-ordinator may find it necessary to prepare extra drills and explanations. In larger universities assistants can be assigned to the language laboratory to help those students who request aid as well as to help the regular beginning students. While independent students wish to work alone and at their own pace, they do have problems and will request help.

A second and very important part of an independent FL program is the course syllabus. The syllabus not only delineates the program and the material to be covered, but it explains what the student will be expected to learn — speaking, reading, writing, or a combination of these three. The syllabus should also suggest different approaches to the material selected. Since

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many students wish the option of deciding for themselves their own method of study, it is not sufficient to suggest only the approach the co-ordinator believes best. If each approach is well presented, students dissatisfied with one approach will usually try another. The co-ordinator (or his assistant) is of course free to make suggestions as the students come to him.

A third and equally important aspect of any independent FL program is the need to establish a means by which the student can check his own progress. For this purpose, taped and written examinations can be prepared and placed in the language laboratory along with answer sheets and references to particular grammatical units and drills in the text. In this way the student is not only able to understand what is expected of him, but he is able to discover where he needs review. Here again, the assistant in the language laboratory can be of service. He can explain to each student why his answers were incorrect and what drills can best help him.

Final examinations are provided upon request. Each final should be designed to correspond to its counterpart in the regular FL courses. This correspondence is important if the independent FL program is to remain academically justifiable.

In order not to encumber registration procedures, those students wishing to continue a given FL level into a second term are given an I (incomplete) grade for the term. Then a change of grade is awarded upon completion of the work required.

As a guide to future planning, each student can also be

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given a questionnaire and the opportunity of making suggestions for the improvement of the independent FL program.

Stimulated by a series of suggestions from students, the Department is currently preparing response and language drills using computer terminals linked to one of the University's computers. Each student will then be able to select and form his own drills.

Other student suggestions are also being considered, and as materials become more readily available, it is hoped we will see the institution of many more, and certainly, better programs.